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MENTAL HEALTH IN THE ARCTIC

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The available literature on mental health in the Arctic is widely scattered through the publications of a number of disciplines. This brief survey may therefore be useful as a guide. Limitations of space allow mention of only the more significant references in English, dealing mainly with the Canadian Arctic, Alaska, and to some extent, Greenland.

Older writers made over-simplified assumptions of climatic causation of abnormal emotional reactions ("Arctic Hysteria"). Later writers reject such simple relationships and discuss climatic and geographic variables as one set of factors to be accommodated in a complex socio-cultural matrix. The survey will cover (1) Mental illness and health in the native peoples in the context of their traditional cultures. (2) Shamanism as related to psychopathology. (3) Problems of acculturation. (4) Small groups of isolated whites. (5) Current pattern of large-scale settlement.

1. Native peoples

A number of writers, e.g. Ackerknecht (1948) and Parker (1962) emphasize the frequency of hysterical features in Eskimo psychopathology, and attempt to explain this in terms of cultural and personality factors. It has also been suggested that psychophysiological reactions are rare but their frequency increases with exposure to European culture.

Carpenter (1953) describes 3 cases of schizophrenia in Eskimos, occurring in the context of an outbreak of witch-fear, and relates this to the psychopathology. Teicher (1954) discusses the same cases, arguing that although content varies with culture the structure and process of schizophrenia is similar to that seen in Western society.

Suicide and homicide are generally believed to have occurred frequently among the Eskimo. Leighton and Hughes (1955) discuss patterns of suicidal behavior and its significance in Eskimo culture as this varies from one part of the Arctic to another. Balikci (1960) reports a very high rate of suicide in one Eskimo group relating this to a low level of social integration. Willis and Martin (1962) point out the frequency of a history of suicide attempts, and aggression directed toward others, in Eskimo patients admitted to mental hospitals. Butler (1965) summarizes suicide statistics in the Canadian Arctic, and states that the Eskimo rate is not higher than that for other ethnic groups in the Northwest territories, but all these rates are considerably higher than the rate for Canada as a whole.

A number of authors have discussed "*Arctic Hysteria*" in the Siberian Arctic, including Ackerknecht (1948) and Aberle (1952). They derive their information from historical accounts of this localized syndrome of hysterical type characterized by convulsions, echolalia, and extreme suggestibility, and discuss possible hereditary, geographical and cultural causal factors.

The classic description of the syndrome *Pibloktoq* is contained in the paper by Brill (1913) utilizing observations made on Peary's trip to the North Pole. The symptoms are variable, but tend to include tearing off clothing, glossolalia, fleeing, rolling in snow or water and performing other bizarre but harmless acts. Brill interprets it as hysterical in nature. In recent reviews Gussow (1960) and Parker (1962) come to much the same conclusion. By contrast Wallace and Ackerman (1960) have set up an interdisciplinary research program to investigate other etiological hypotheses.

A phobic neurosis manifested by anxiety attacks while using a kayak, known as *Kayakangst*, is apparently well-known in Greenland and reported in the Danish literature. In a recent very thorough review of available information, Gussow (1963) analyzes it as a reaction to sensory deprivation and offers a psychodynamic explanation in terms of the culture.

Wiitiko or *Windigo* psychosis was a bizarre syndrome historically described in Indians of the Northeast Canadian woodlands. The outstanding symptom was a compulsive desire to eat human flesh, often leading to actual acts of cannibalism, usually directed against members of the immediate family. This was frequently accompanied by a delusion of transformation into the mythical Windigo monster.

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Parker (1960) and Teicher (1960) review and evaluate the earlier literature.

2. Shamanism

Any general discussion of shamanism among Arctic peoples would lead too far afield. Two aspects are of particular psychiatric interest. One, discussed by a number of authors, e.g. Murphy and Leighton (1965), seems to indicate that hysterical types of behavior may predispose an individual for the institutionalized role of shaman (or Angakok), and that the shaman's dissociative behavior serves in turn as a model for other individuals, and helps account for the high incidence of "hysterical" behavior. The second aspect, namely as an indigenous form of psychotherapy, is covered generally by Kiev (1964) and Ackerknecht (1948).

3. Culture change

Much valuable background material is contained in an encyclopedic review by Hughes (1965). Unfortunately, problems of mental health are mentioned only in passing, presumably due to a paucity of reliable data. Willis and Martin (1962) comment at some length upon problems of alcoholism, family breakdown and crime among Eskimos in areas of rapid and disorganizing acculturation. There is no evidence of an increased incidence of mental illness as such, but it is suggested that often the stresses of acculturation are accompanied by rising indices of psycho-social strain such as alcoholism, crime, family breakdown etc.

By contrast, Chance (1965) notes in certain instances health appears not to suffer during acculturation, and attempts to identify the factors involved. He also discusses methodological issues such as the use of the Cornell Medical Index. Similar questions of methodology are discussed by Murphy and Leighton (1965).

4. Isolated white groups

There is a general belief that interpersonal problems in small groups in expeditions or isolated settlements are frequent, but there is no convincing evidence that these are worse than in other parts of the world. Shelesnyak (1947) in a general paper on problems of human ecology in Polar regions undertakes a speculative discussion of problems of adaptation and selection. A number of anecdotal accounts of general clinical experience have been published by physicians working in isolated posts.

A small number of formal studies of adaptation in the Arctic are available. Boag (1952) reports on a preliminary study of problems of adjustment, and Smith (1949), and Wright, Sisler and Chylinski (1963) investigated the use of a variety of psychological tests for selection, without success. In summary, it seems that no particularly helpful guides to selection have emerged that go beyond the usual description of a stable, adaptable individual who is well motivated.

5. Settlements

Finally there is a group of papers surveying mental health problems within the current pattern of more extensive white settlement. Willis (1960) discusses in general terms the mental health hazards of northern settlement, and the factors which must be considered in settlement planning. Butler (1965) surveys suicide rates and notes that the rate among the white population is greater than for Canada generally. Willis and Martin (1962) note that the mental hospital admission rate for the white group is considerably lower than for Canada as a whole and explain this by the selective nature of the population. Few general conclusions can be drawn from the available figures.

Summary: This brief summary of mental health problems in the Arctic covers traditional cultures of the native peoples and the present phase of social and economic change. Space allows reference to only the more recent and general publications.

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